Caroline Frank, Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America.

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REFERENCES


1 In her Objectifying China, Imagining America, Caroline Frank argues that British North America was involved in the China trade well before independence and she goes on to explore the significance of the quest for and consumption of Chinese commodities to the political identity of the colonies on the verge of the Revolutionary War.

2 The book is excitingly new on several fronts. While previous scholars date Anglo America’s commercial engagement with China to the post-revolutionary era, Frank finds evidence for it since the 1690s, well ahead independence. More than chronology is at stake in this move. Frank attributes the inability of generations of cultural historians to see the glaring evidence of early American cultural intercourse with Asia to the powerful imperialist construction of colonial America as lacking cultural sophistication, one adopted by Americans themselves, who gave it a positive twist and imagined themselves as living in virtuous simplicity. Material evidence like the frescoed Chinese scenes painted around 1720 on the walls of a home in Newport, Rhode Island, deny this ideological paradigm, as do the over one thousand probate inventories Frank meticulously examines, which testify to the presence of chinaware in three quarters of the estates appraised in 1760.

3 New as well is Frank’s methodological weaving of commercial and cultural history. Specifically, she recovers trade as essential to the meaning of objects. Imperial mandates forbid the colonies from holding independent trade with Asia. Tea and chinaware could
therefore only be bought from England. Getting these commodities outside of the confines of legal imperial trade, often in the Dutch or French Caribbean, was at the same time a smart business move and an assertion of one’s valiant masculinity through the hazards of illegal commerce. The anonymous portrait of Moses Marcy, one of several examples of figurative arts examined in the book, makes the connection between the possession of chinaware and manliness explicit. Marcy both carries a sword and drinks from a Chinese punch bowl that the viewer infers has been brought to his estate by the vessel in the background. Weapon, ship, and china are linked as instrument and expression of the manhood exuded by the portrait.

In this association between Asian commodities and masculinity lies one aspect of their specifically American cultural meaning. Frank argues, again setting her apart from previous studies, that colonial Americans participated in the phenomenon of “pan-Atlantic Orientalism” in a distinct way. For instance, while in Britain Asian goods were more often associated with women and deemed dangerously effeminate for men, in the American colonies the emasculating perils of objects from Asia, where men enfeebled by luxury were ruled by despot, were counterbalanced by the invigorating effects of the perilous trade necessary to obtain them. Similarly, while the British were concerned about the potential social confusion entailed in the spreading of tea drinking among the working classes, colonial Americans feared the draining of colonial coffers caused by the consumption of non-domestic goods, regardless of the status of the consumer.

In a fascinating final chapter, Frank further explores the political meaning of tea in colonial America. There, she revisits the Boston Tea Party that ignited the Revolution by, in her words, “putting China back into it.” She accounts for the unprecedented emotional reaction created by Tea Act of 1773, which allowed the East India Company to import tea directly to the colonies, objectively a lesser ill than many other crippling imperial mandates, in terms of the metaphorical associations of tea. In 1763, Britain asserted its control over India and prohibited the colonists from expanding westward both, which left British Americans wondering whether the mother country considered them not as equal partners in an imperial venture, but rather as inferior subjects indistinguishable from the new colonized people of India. Tea, produced in Asia by men too weak to defend themselves from despot domestic or foreign, and now imposed on Americans, became invested with all these apprehensions. Hence, American patriots rejected it, but only until their victory over Britain. In the immediate aftermath of the Treaty of Paris of 1783, which concluded the revolution, US vessels started sailing into the Indian Ocean and buying tea directly from its producers, often to sell it back in Europe or South America. By now the apprehension that tea may compromise the manhood of those who drank it was neutralized by the masculinity derived by establishing strong trade positions.

Objectifying China, Imagining America is a beautiful book. It shows what we believed about the remoteness of early America is false. It bases its conclusions on an intimidating amount of research. It is methodologically complex and theoretically sophisticated. It is so clearly and engagingly written it is hard to put it down. Yet, it surprisingly participates in a very old-fashioned conception of colonial America as little more than New England, to the complete exclusion of the South. Although the subtitle claims the subject is Chinese Commodities in Early America, and one assumes that means all of early America, Frank does not discuss anything south of Pennsylvania. True, in her discussion she often refers to the geographical space of her investigation as the “Northern British colonies,” but in the transnational American studies of which she is undoubtedly a practitioner should not
that expression designate the British colonies in North America as opposed to, let's say, Jamaica, also an American British colony? Instead, as readers clearly understand by chapter four, “The Oriental Aesthetic in Old Yankee Households,” the “northern colonial homes” Frank studies are situated exclusively in the northern section of British North America. That in itself would not be problematic if the author had acknowledged the geographical limits of the investigation and accounted for them instead of leaving the omission of the South unspoken, as if to be taken for granted. As it is, the reader is left wondering whether there was no china in Virginia or tea drinking in the Carolinas and Georgia and why. It is a real pity that a scholar able to see China in early America should be blind to the presence of the South in that same early America.

With this caveat, Objecting China, Imagining America is still a wonderfully recommendable book, an important contribution to the understanding of colonial America’s global cultural and commercial network and to the study of U.S.-China relations. Finally, it is a refreshingly clear work, accessible to outsiders or newcomers to the discipline as well as to American studies veterans.

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